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SIPDIS

NSC FOR CHRIS CLAYTON, DEPT FOR NEA/MAG AND NEA/PPD

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: ALGERIA: OBAMA IS "AMERICA WE DREAMED ABOUT"

REF: ALGIERS 65

Classified By: Ambassador David D. Pearce for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: While we expected a mostly positive reaction to President Obama's inauguration in the Algerian press (reftel) and among most Algerians, the Ambassador received a surprisingly strong positive reaction from former prime minister and ruling National Liberation Front (FLN) chairman Abdelaziz Belkhadem on January 21. Belkhadem broke from his traditional stoicism with almost bubbling enthusiasm for President Obama, recounting how he stayed up late to watch the inauguration festivities and saying that President Obama represented "the America we dreamed about when we were young." Other Algerian elites voiced similar optimism today for the new administration. END SUMMARY.

UP ALL NIGHT

12. (C) Ambassador met with Minister of State without portfolio and FLN secretary-general Abdelaziz Belkhadem early on January 21. Belkhadem predictably criticized Israeli actions in Gaza, but his main focus was praise for President Obama's inaugural address and optimism about the new U.S. administration. Belkhadem hailed Obama's first act, the freezing of the Guantanamo tribunals, as a hopeful sign that the new president was serious about putting values at the center of U.S. foreign policy, a prospect Belkhadem welcomed. Accompanied by FLN External Relations Director Salah Goudjil, Belkhadem said that Obama's inaugural address brought about an immense feeling of hope for Arab countries and for the world as a whole. The typically dour Belkhadem appeared to be personally moved by yesterday's events, recounting how he stayed up well into the night to watch the coverage of the inaugural balls, and added that he is roughly halfway finished reading the President's memoir "Dreams from My Father."

THE ALGERIAN DREAM

13. (C) Belkhadem told the Ambassador that the United States under President Kennedy was a symbol of hope and emancipation for Algerians during their war of independence from France. (Note: Kennedy was the most prominent of world leaders to support the anti-colonial cause and his values and vision of the world greatly influenced now-senior FLN members during their formative years. Not far from the Embassy is a square named Place Kennedy. End Note). Belkhadem recounted his fondness for the United States in the 1960s and said he saw similarities between Kennedy's approach and Obama, reminding

him of the "America we dreamed about while we were growing up and building our country." He also expressed his hope that Senator Kennedy would recover from his collapse at the inaugural luncheon.

14. (C) Belkhadem spoke at length about President Obama's commitment to the values espoused in his inaugural address. The FLN leader said that, in his opinion, the previous administration's mantra that "you are with us or against us" has now faded, and there is now more political space for the U.S. to develop deeper and more nuanced relations with the Arab world. President Obama's quick action regarding the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay was taken by Belkhadem as an important positive signal of the new president's intentions. Belkhadem stated that it is not the United States' military or diplomatic power that will cause Algeria to follow its lead, but rather, its values.

15. (C) The Ambassador heard similar praise on January 21 from two other markedly different Algerian notables with unique insight into the inner workings of the Algerian regime. Former Ambassador to the U.S. Mohamed Sahnoun said that the Obama inaugural address set the "right tone" for audiences in the Middle East and that the change in administrations would be "psychologically important." Sahnoun believed the President's public statements on the need to focus our military efforts in Afghanistan would also resonate well with Arab leaders. Meanwhile, Algerian novelist and former government economist Boualem Sansal, whose work has been banned by the Algerian authorities, praised President Obama for his warning to world leaders against stifling dissent, a

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message that Sansal felt Algeria's leadership ought to consider.

COMMENT

16. (C) The Islamist Belkhadem interspersed his positive remarks about President Obama with doses of harsh criticism of Israeli actions in Gaza. But on the President's inaugural address, he was consistently positive. The values espoused in the address, specifically the pursuit of mutual respect and the idea that America's position of power should come from our unassailable values rather than military might, obviously struck a chord. And Belkhadem made a point of saying that his view was representative of the Algerian government. If so, it would appear that the Algerian government sees in the Obama Administration an opportunity for a new beginning, and for the United States to assume the role of moral leader, not just technical partner in the war on terror. On the issue of values, Belkhadem noted that he hoped the U.S. would review carefully its policy on Western Sahara, especially in light of its history of support for the right of self-determination, including Kennedy's support for Algeria's freedom struggle in the face of opposition from a NATO ally, France.

PEARCE